

Home of peace

Adaobi could not believe the news she had just heard, the entire *izge* village was in uproar. The news of the kidnap of the girls of Maraba Girls High School had gone round the village. Her girls had been kidnapped! The same ones she had taught mathematics in a classroom could not be found – Binta, Aisha, Jamila, Halima, Fatima and Zaria were among her favourites – She found herself at the primary health care center where she lay on a mat, trying as hard as she could to stand but could not. She had taken a day off work on account of malaria, or so the nurse said, although no blood tests were conducted, it was just assumed that it must be malaria since she had seen her period few days before.

The room seemed to spin in her eyes with cold sweat forming gradually on her forehead, she had to remove the scarf she tied on her head but even this was a struggle. The walls were beginning to turn red, she felt the need to throw up, she quickly searched for a bucket, found one around the corner, knelt on the cold, hard, cement floor and retched. Feeling slightly relieved, she found a stainless cup half filled with tap water by the side of the mat, picked it up and drank some water. She lay back on the mat; using the flat pillow she was given as a head rest, silently hoping the pillow wasn't ridden with bed bugs, but in this state she couldn't be bothered by such irrelevancies as bed bugs or malaria. She only wanted to be strong so she could walk outside and see for herself what exactly was going on in the village and with her girls. She thought of all the teachers in the school, she

thought of the friendly Principal, Mr. Musa who reminded her of her father and said a prayer for them.

‘How could this be? Where is everybody?’ She asked but there was no one in sight, the health care center was deserted after the news of the kidnap spread around the village. The only nurse attending to her had run out of the bungalow that is the health care center with incredible speed. Her niece, Jamila, also attended the school, in fact, all girls in the village attended the school, over 100 of them and they had all been kidnapped by *boko haram* - an infamous group against western education and everything Christian, by their beliefs, the only education which Muslims ought to have is the Islamic education. Their fame spread all over Nigeria after they bombed many churches and killed many Christians; they claimed responsibility time and time again for these atrocities but have never been apprehended. They come and go like the wind, live in forests and in the trees, in deserts and in caves. They come like a whisper and depart as a flame, leaving behind blood and tears everywhere they strike.

From a distance, she could hear the wailing of their mothers and other voices speaking frantically in the *izge* language. The entire village was in chaos, the mothers and relatives of the kidnapped girls were screaming at the top of their voices, demanding answers. Their fathers had just returned from the farm, cutlass in hand, the local news station had arrived, making calls to the main television station in Maiduguri. The air was filled with pain and desperation; it was so tangible it could be touched.

Adaobi could sense it even from a distance; she could see it all from the mat where she lay in the health centre. She could only think of her girls, the oldest of them being Zaria at 16 years. She admired her ambition and will. Zaria's father, Mai Tabutu, a farmer had threatened to disown her if she refused to marry Mai Gamzaki, a wealthy chief within the village, a man in his late sixties who had recently divorced one of his oldest wives to make room for a new wife. Zaria had blatantly refused her father's instructions and had run to her own house on one occasion. She could remember the rage in her eyes, the trembling of her hands and the disgust in her tone when she mentioned Mai Gamzaki's name. She remembered how Mai Tabutu barged into her room and almost killed his own daughter for her disobedience but for the intervention of the wooden pillar in her humble room, they would have both been history. The wooden pillar in her room had been her saviour that night, as Mai Tabutu swung his hand to strike; his aim caught the wood instead and got stuck in it. Zaria's mother who had followed him had screamed in fright when she saw what had happened, pounced on him and bit him hard on his neck, she continued to attack him until he overpowered her and pushed her away. Realizing what he had done or could have done, he left her room without his cutlass and held his hand to his neck as he left. Mother and daughter were both visibly shaken but Adaobi was immobile and still in shock. She could have died that night as she sought to protect Zaria from the hands of her own father. They had all slept in her room that night on the mat but she could not catch a wink of

sleep, shock will not permit sleep. She was also afraid that she may wake up without a head. Mai Tabutu eventually allowed his daughter to go to school; she was to be married after her secondary education but Mai Gamzaki could not afford to wait, so he picked another girl of 14 years of age whom he quickly married and without delay put in the family way.

Adaobi struggled to crawl away from the mat and passed through the see-through curtain that served as a door to get a better view. She later found herself outside the health center flat on the cemented floor but could not descend the few stairs. She could see Mai Tabutu and many other concerned fathers, they had formed a circle at the center of the village. The primary health care center was not too far from the center of the village and in the middle of the circle there were some lifeless human bodies, three lifeless bodies. She recognized those three even from a distance, she had worked with, eaten with, joked with those three during the course of her stay in the village. She knew them, and they also knew her, while they were alive. She trembled as she saw the lifeless bodies of her beloved Mr. Musa, the school principal, Mai Bello the security guard and Ahmed.

‘Ahmed! Ahmed!’ She groaned in pain. There was a tight knot in her stomach, she felt the need to vomit again and she did, over and over again. She could not believe her eyes. Her eyes were in pain, hot painful tears fell across her face as though in a hurry. She felt a sudden ache all over her body.

‘This cannot be happening’ she said somehow hoping to be awoken from this nightmare and offered a glass of warm milk and cookies.

Ahmed was her friend and fellow youth corp member; they had both been posted to Maraba Girls High School as teachers from the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Secretariat in Maiduguri, Borno State. The scheme was designed by the Government of Nigeria to promote unity by sending out fresh graduates of various tertiary institutions all over the Nation to distant lands where they would serve their host communities based on their needs. They served as teachers and were already nine months into the twelve month program.

She remembered Ahmed who was ever so full of life and cheer, she could vividly recount the pure excitement and passion with which he taught the girls, knowing Ahmed, he must have tried to get in the way of the *boko haram*. He was the English teacher; he graduated with second class honours, upper division from the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He was truly a bright chap who had an even brighter future ahead of him, he was 22 years of age. Adaobi looked at his lifeless body from a distance; his green khaki had become bloodied brown as it mingled with dust. He obviously died a brutal death, he was axed down and shot, he must have truly struggled with them.

Ahmed was dead! Her age mate, play mate, friend and colleague was dead. The girls could not be found, the men who had tried to go after the *boko*

*haram* had returned with disappointment written boldly on their faces. Their pain could not be masked, young and old, male and female gathered in the middle of the village oblivious to the scorching heat of the sun, in despondency, many sat on the bare ground, while others took shade under the trees. The wailing did not cease, the mothers refused to be comforted cried and screamed out in pain, in the futile hope that their screams will bring back their girls. Their fathers cried too, they cried bitter tears, they cried helpless tears, their young girls had been kidnapped by the *boko haram* and everybody knew what that meant – they may never be found.

As Adaobi lay flat on the floor, she felt a mixture of pity, pain and something else, unease. It just dawned on her that she would have been kidnapped too, raped or killed had she gone to teach today. Suddenly, cold chills crept down her spine as she lay spinelessly on the floor. She would probably have been the fourth lying next to Ahmed because she would not have given up without a fight, defending the girls she loved so much. Her pain knew no bounds; she wept and vomited again and again because her stomach could not digest all these at once. She felt very weak and dizzy. Speechless, dazed and confused, no one is taught at the University what to do at a time as desperate as this. At this point, nothing seemed to matter, nothing.

‘Do I stand, or sit or lie on my belly rolling in vomit?’ she asked herself somehow hoping the answer would pop out from the abyss or that the silence would speak.

As she saw Zaria's mother drowning in her own stream of tears, almost choking on her own sobs, she remembered her own mother who had tried to move heaven and earth to ensure her reposting back to Lagos through the influence of a bribe. Her mother, a petty trader, could not afford the sum asked for by Mr. Charles, an official of the NYSC who requested for a sum her mother could not afford to pay. Her mother appealed to his humanity and tried to strike a bargain with him but he would not budge.

'Mama, One hundred thousand naira or nothing' he said

'*Oga* Charles, why is it so expensive, other people are taking less than fifty thousand naira, *biko*' mama pleaded

'NYSC posting to Lagos is very expensive mama unless you want somewhere else. Other people that will collect less from you may not be able to influence your daughters posting oo, just don't waste your money'

Mama pleaded and pleaded with him until he requested for payment in another kind. The kind that would be exchanged within the bed sheets. Mama gave him a befitting hard slap across his face, that full five fingered slap that had the capacity to restore sanity to the insane. She knew Mama's slap all too well, she had been its recipient on a number of occasions. Mama's slap was the kind of slap that left an individual temporarily blind, deaf and mute all at the same time. Mr. Charles could not speak afterwards; the slap must have seized his tongue and as he held one side of his face with two hands, we left him to continue on our way. Mama eventually found



someone else who agreed to take thirty thousand naira, all the money she had on her. Eventually, her reposting was not successful and the man ran away with all the money.

Her mother's relatives had gathered around to raise money for her to go to the camp, knowing how important the NYSC scheme was, she knew that if she refused to do it she would lose an entire year because she would not be able to work in any establishment without a discharge certificate from the NYSC. For this reason, she decided to report to the Maiduguri camp amidst her mother's many prayers.

The Federal Government had made promises to the youth corps members posted to volatile areas in North-Eastern Nigeria assuaging all fears of attack by the *boko haram* whom they described as being 'under control'. The Nigerian Army had been in hot pursuit of the *boko haram* and had succeeded in killing and arresting quite a number of them and this gave everybody hope.

She remembered her journey by road from Lagos to Borno, it was a two day journey. They had stopped over many times during the course of the journey. The vehicle was driven by two men who took turns to drive the large bus during the two day trip. Her mother called so often that the battery on her mobile phone was drained out. At the time she got to the camp ground in Maiduguri, she quickly called her mother to inform her that she was safe. The corps members were promised full security and

protection, they were also promised that they would not be posted to volatile areas of the state. *Izge* was once peaceful too.

Jerked back to reality, she thought of the news of the kidnapped girls which must have circulated by now, she needed to call her mother, fast! She crawled back into the bungalow which housed the primary health care center which was now deserted; she got her mobile phone and placed a call to her mother.

Thankfully, her mother picked the call but upon hearing the news, her mother screamed and demanded she get back to Lagos immediately.

‘Adaobi! Only the living can serve the nation, please pack your bags and start coming home, *crying*, you know you are all I have left after the death of your father, please come home’

‘Mama, I’ve heard you, please stop crying. I am alive; I’ll call you back okay. Please don’t cry’ she said before the phone battery ran out. There was no light in the *izge* village; the only place in the whole village that had electricity was the primary health center because they used a small generator which had now run out of fuel. She crawled back outside and by now the entire village was full of people from near and far.

The news of the kidnapping had gone round, along with the news of the death of Ahmed, a youth corps member. An officer from the NYSC secretariat at Maiduguri had come together with the police and news men and women. The village was packed full with people asking many questions.

The lifeless body of Ahmed was wrapped in white linen, his face was cleaned and his body was placed carefully on a small mat under a tree. She saw as the nurse pointed in the direction of the health care center and she saw Mr. Ibrahim walking in her direction. Mr. Ibrahim was an officer at the NYSC secretariat at Maiduguri a two hour drive from *izge*. He identified her because of her khaki.

‘I hope you are not hurt?’ he asked

‘I am not feeling too well. Ahmed is dead and the girls have been kidnapped’ she replied

‘Yes, I heard’ he said with his head bowed ‘Ahmed was butchered like a wild animal’ he said with tears in his eyes. ‘We need to take you away from here, can you walk to the car?’ he asked

‘I am too weak to walk’ she said

‘I will carry you’ he said and with his long arms he lifted her above the ground and carried her through the hot sun to the place where the car was parked.

From the car, she could see other youth corpses and people from neighbouring villages trooping in to render assistance, but it was too late. The deed had already been done. From the car radio, the breaking news was aired; the once peaceful *izge* community had been thrown into mourning and into uncertainty. Ahmed’s death was also announced on radio

along with that of the principal and Mr Bello. Everyone was advised to be security conscious and to report any suspicious behaviour.

The family members of the deceased could be seen from a distance carrying the bodies of their beloved. She remembered the burial of her own father, papa as he was fondly called, lifted in a coffin. He died after he had accidentally slipped and fell at a construction site in Lagos when she was six. She never forgot his burial which was hurried and unceremonious because his brothers sought to claim the house they lived as theirs due to the absence of a male heir. She and her mother were thrown out to the streets like dogs; thankfully, her mother had kind relatives in Lagos who housed them for a while and helped her mother get back on her feet by raising capital for her to start her own business. They also offered them a room at their family house in Lagos.

Adaobi remembered her last conversation with Ahmed and how unhappy he was because the NYSC scheme was coming to an end. He spoke of how he would miss the girls in the school and the community at large. They were indeed kind, hardworking and noble people. He spoke of his own family at Kaduna and the religious disagreements between the Christians and Moslems and other internal tribal conflicts. He spoke about the spirit behind the NYSC scheme which was aimed at instilling in the young, a sense of unity and of belonging to a nation that is ours. He was always so optimistic and full of hope. He never for once thought of influencing his posting away from Borno but was thrilled at the prospect of what he called

‘the adventure of a lifetime.’ Unknown to him, the adventure he spoke so enthusiastically about would one day claim his own life and the values he so believed in would one day usher in his death in the hands of the merciless. She remembered Ahmed, so clearly, he kept a beard and wore jumping trousers, had a dark patch on his forehead because of the times he prayed with his forehead touching the bare ground.

His assailants must have seen that he was indeed a Muslim too or were they so blinded by hate that they could not recognize a brother? Were they so blinded by rage that they did not see Halima’s hijab? Were they so deafened by religion that they could not hear the terrified cries of the girls? Were they so religious that they ceased to be human?

The most respected man in the community and Imam was Alfa Mohammed Tanko - at times he gave Adaobi a hard time because of her beliefs as a Christian. He was relieved that she was merely a corps member who would be gone after her service year was over, but still, he was a tolerant man who respected her beliefs and was fair to all- he was interviewed by the reporters that stormed the community, and when asked for his opinion on the terrible incident within his community, he had this to say,

‘*Izge* has always been a peaceful community, in fact this is the first time we have experienced an attack by the *boko haram*. We have always heard of their attacks in different places and of their atrocities but always thought that we were beyond their reach because we do not have Christians in our

community. We have always sympathized with other victims; our hearts have truly reached out to them without knowing that we would one day suffer greatly from the hands of the *boko haram*. It is now clear that terrorism is a vice that does not respect tribe or religion or any other sentiment. It is borne only out of hatred and therefore has no justification. They are terrorists with ill intentions that seek to manipulate the sentiments which divide us by turning us against one another in the name of religion. There is no justification whatsoever, for killing and kidnapping innocent people in the name of Allah; the most beneficent and merciful. What they have done has a name, this is a crime and they are dangerous criminals and not brothers in the faith. My daughter Halima was kidnapped too; it is not *haram* to educate a girl child, education is not a crime. Please bring back my girl, please bring back my joy in the name of Allah!’

For the first time Adaobi saw Alfa Tanko cry, he was crying on National television. As the leader in the community, it was his responsibility to always be strong, for others and for himself but this time, it was different. Halima was his only child and the child of his old age. He had her at a time when he and his wife had given up hope of ever having a child, they had both resigned to the will of God till they got favour and his wife bore a daughter but when she was born, she did not cry, they feared that she was dead till an obstruction was removed from her mouth did she begin to cry. He named her Halima meaning, gentle and mild. Halima was indeed pampered by her parents, her appearance and gait at the school spoke of

fine grooming and finesse. Her head was always covered but one could always see her curly hausa-fulani hair from the side of her oval face. She had big white eyes, full lashes, a delicate nose and a clear brown skin. She always looked pampered; she was in fact pampered by Alfa Tanko who always escorted Halima to school daily with an umbrella in hand. He intended that Halima would one day attend the University; and because of this, he turned down many of her suitors, she was 14 years of age. His hope had been taken away, the child of his old age had been taken away, he cried over and over again. Even those whose daughters had been kidnapped too came to console him, for his pain was great indeed.

Mr. Ibrahim had just gotten off a phone call made to Ahmed's parents in Kaduna. His family was on their way to Borno by road. Ahmed's body lay peacefully under the tree. Adaobi felt strong enough to walk away from the car to where his lifeless body was wrapped under the tree. She intended to pay her last respect to her dear friend.

'Ahmed, can you hear me' she said, with tears rolling down her face onto the hard brown ground. 'It is me, Ada the mathematician' – as he fondly called her but he did not reply. He looked like he was asleep. The sand on his face had been cleaned away and she could see his beards, full brow and slender nose. Ahmed. She kissed his forehead and knelt beside him, hopelessly.

The girls were still missing, over one hundred girls and there were no leads, nobody had any idea where they may be. The army had also come, and they were guarding the area. They were the ones who were supposedly chasing the *boko haram*, they were the ones who were supposed to have the answers and the solutions, yet they were the ones asking all the questions. Everyone moped at them and moped at their ineptitude but with their heavy artillery, no one dared to speak. They got some answers to their questions and also got some more questions too. Then they went to the school in search of something top secret which they could not divulge.

Mr Ibrahim sat beside Adaobi

‘I am sorry for your loss’ he said

‘I am sorry for our loss’ she replied

They both sat on the floor in silence while they stared at Ahmed’s lifeless body as it lay on the small but long mat.

From beneath the tree where she sat, she looked in the direction of the car she had walked out from and she starred at the plate number of the vehicle, she saw above the numbers some words which read,

‘Borno: Home of peace.’